

Romans 16:17 Explained
Roy H. Lanier, Sr.

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“Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned: and turn away from them.”

This verse has been explained by Bro. Carl Ketcherside and others as teaching three things: 1. The doctrine of this verse is the doctrine of peace, that Christians should live in peace. This conclusion is reached because peace is mentioned by Paul several times in chapters 12 through 15, such as 12:17-21; 14:19. 2. That we are to mark those only who are causing divisions contrary to this doctrine as taught in this Roman letter. 3. That the phrase “turn away from them” means simply to avoid or shun those who cause divisions contrary to the doctrine of peace as taught in this letter.

What is the doctrine of this verse? I believe it is the doctrine of Christ, the whole body of Christ’s teaching. It is the same thing as the “words of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Tim. 6:3), and the “doctrine of Christ” (2 John 9). Paul tells us to withdraw ourselves from those who teach a different doctrine (1 Tim. 6:3-5), and here he tells us to “turn away from” those who cause divisions contrary to the doctrine. Since he tells us to act in the same way toward those who cause divisions contrary to the doctrine and those who teach a different doctrine, we must conclude that the same sin is under consideration in both verses.

This is the doctrine which the brethren in Rome had learned and obeyed. In Rom. 6:17, we read that they had obeyed from the heart the form of doctrine and in consequence thereof they had been made free from sin and become servants of righteousness. Here we have the word “doctrine” where Bro. K. thinks it should be gospel. He says everything necessary to make a person a child of God is gospel; everything necessary for the growth and development of a child of God is doctrine. But the word doctrine in Rom. 6:17 obviously refers to things one must obey to become a Christian.

The tense of the verbs “obeyed” and “learned” in these two verses throw some light on the subject. They are both aorist indicative which means that they describe point action in the past, rather than linear action. This means that their obedience (6:17) was point action in the past and was not motivated by anything Paul wrote in his letter. This also means that they learned the doctrine of 16:17 at a point in the past and not from anything Paul wrote in the letter. One might as well say that the Romans were motivated to obey from the heart the form of doctrine contained in the letter Paul was presently writing, as to say they learned the doctrine of 16:17 from the letter Paul was presently writing. If Paul had intended to say they were to turn away from those who cause divisions contrary to the doctrine taught in his letter, he would not have said “which ye learned,” but he would have said “which ye are now learning.” In other words, he would not have used the aorist tense for “learned,” but he would have used the present tense. The verse would have read, Turn away from those who cause divisions contrary to the doctrine which ye are now learning.

What is meant by “turn away from them”? Thayer says the Greek word (*ekklinatē*-aorist, imperative) means “keep away, aloof, from one’s society.” M. R. Vincent says, “Not only keep out of their way, but remove from it if you fall in with them.” The word is used only three times in the New Testament. In 1 Pet. 3:11, we are told to “turn away from evil.” This is equal to “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness” (Eph. 5:11). So to “turn away from” those who cause divisions contrary to the doctrine is equal to having no fellowship with them. The third occurrence of the word is in Rom. 3:12, where we are told all had “turned aside” from God and had become unprofitable. What had these done when they turned aside from God? Verses 13 through 18 describe their condition as those who have absolutely no fellowship

with God. So as those who “turned aside” from God had no fellowship with him, when we “turn away from” those who cause divisions contrary to the doctrine we must have no fellowship with them.

Some are defining the phrase “turn away from” to mean merely to shun or avoid, but not to break fellowship. Is it possible that one in the fellowship to which God has called us can shun, avoid, another in that same fellowship? If God accepts him as being in the fellowship, why should not we accept him? If he has fellowship with God, why should we shun him? This hardly measures up that sweet fellowship which brethren are advocating. The soft pedal is being put on the meaning of this phrase because they think the fellowship cannot be broken over any error of doctrine which does not deny the deity of Christ.

It is interesting to note that the divisions of Rom. 16:17 are the same as divisions in Gal. 5:20, where Paul lists the works of the flesh. So those guilty of causing “divisions and occasions of stumbling” are guilty of a “work of the flesh” and, according to Paul, shall not inherit the kingdom of God. Now, if we are merely to shun, avoid, those who cause divisions in Rom. 16:17, what is to be our attitude toward those who are guilty of divisions in Gal. 5:20? If we are merely to shun, but not break fellowship with, those who are guilty of causing divisions in one verse, it seems only just and right that we should do so with those in the other verse. But if we only shun, but do not break fellowship with those who cause divisions in Gal. 5:20, what is to be our attitude toward those who practice the other sins in the same list. Paul says those who practice divisions as well as all the others in the list “shall not inherit the kingdom.” He treats them all alike; why should we not treat them all alike?

We are told to “mark” them who cause divisions. Thayer says the Greek word means “to look at, observe, contemplate; to fix one’s eyes upon, direct one’s attention to, any one.” He cites Rom. 16:17 as an example of this last part of his definition. Marking the false teacher is simply directing people’s attention to him and his teaching, but to “turn away from” them is the discipline they are to receive as a consequence of their false teaching.

Again we suggest that elders should renew their vigilance to detect the “winds of doctrine” that “toss to and fro” unsuspecting babes in Christ; that as shepherds they watch their fold and protect their sheep from “grievous wolves” that spare not the flock under their care (Acts 20:29). To measure up to the responsibilities of their office they must hold the faithful word which is according to the teaching, and they must possess the ability to exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict the gainsayer. “For there are many unruly men, vain talkers and deceivers, . . . whose mouths must be stopped” lest they overthrow whole houses, families, by teaching things which they ought not (Titus 1:9-11). This warning from Paul concerns the duty of elders with reference to teachers, preachers. They are to stop the mouths of preachers who preach false doctrines. On my recent trip to California I was told of one group of elders who measured up to their responsibility and stopped the mouth of their preacher who was trying to lead the congregation to fellowship all baptized believers regardless of their doctrines and practices. But I was told of others where the elders did not measure up to their responsibility and where trouble and division reign today. I also learned of one congregation where both the preacher and the elders know and love the truth. But the truth preached “in love,” holding the “pattern of sound words,” was too narrow for some and about thirty families left for other places of worship. However, the church is in fine spiritual condition and is growing today. Elders must not be afraid to stand for the truth and discipline those who will not live by it.